

Naval War College
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Haig at Cambrai: Lessons in Operational Leadership

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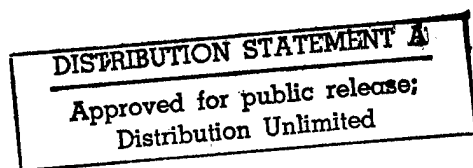
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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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15. Abstract: The dynamic nature of the British operation at Cambrai in 1917, in particular related to the actions of the British CINC Douglas Haig, provides useful insights into the nature of operational leadership for today. This is true in large part because the Cambrai operation came at a time when technology, tactics and strong political pressure came together to exert their combined influence on all levels of war, particularly the operational level. A similar situation exists today. The primary lessons which can be drawn from Haig's experience as an operational commander at Cambrai include; the need to define and communicate the commander's intent, an operational commander's need to avoid involving himself at the tactical level, and the requirement for an operational commander to examine carefully his motives for deciding on a particular course of action.			
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The Battle of Cambrai can, in terms of warfare, be seen as the bridge between the 19th and 20th Centuries. For the first time, new technologies in the form of tanks, aircraft and artillery came together in a single operation and in a form which would influence their use for the remainder of the century. *Blitzkrieg*, combined arms and AirLand Battle can all trace their modern roots directly to this brief operation overseen by the British Commander in Chief (CINC) on the Western Front, Sir Douglas Haig and conducted by the British Third Army in November 1917. As the American military prepares to face the challenges of warfare in the next century, it seems appropriate to return to this relatively obscure, though watershed, operation in search of lessons which may prove useful for future operational commanders.

A new epoch in artillery tactics had dawned, and the crux of the art of war—surprise—had come into its own despite the assembly of nearly 500 tanks. The battle seemed lifted out of the context of the Western Front; its time pressures, thrusts and parries, its fluidity, its chances and disappointments, were comparable with some of the great battles of the Second World War; and the seeds of Hitler's *Gotterdammerung* were sown here.¹

The dynamic nature of the operation, combined with the use of new technology and tactics heralded the return to maneuver warfare and a chance for the rebirth of operational art. Unfortunately, Douglas Haig was unable to convert surprise, a successful penetration maneuver and a technological edge into a decisive victory. Why that happened is precisely the question that must be asked in order to understand the lessons Cambrai holds for today's operational leaders. In simplest terms, Haig's lack of success at Cambrai can be traced directly to his inability to define and communicate his operational intentions--thereby pointing out a timeless truth for the operational commander--that a CINC's first responsibility is to accurately define and clearly communicate his intent for any given operation.

Also contributing to the reversals at Cambrai was Haig's penchant for involving himself in tactical decisions and thereby neglecting his proper role as the link between the strategic and operational levels of war. In this sense, Haig failed to understand the "optimal balance between centralized and decentralized command and control" which is so crucial to today's operational level commanders.²

Although operating under the constraints of economy of force, much as will future U.S. CINCs, Haig's actions at Cambrai added a final characteristic that has relevance to the modern commander. A CINC must, then as now, understand the overall context of his activities and be willing to resist pressure (especially self-imposed as in Haig's case) to commit forces for anything other than the most compelling reason. At Cambrai, even though he was aware that he did not have sufficient forces to exploit success, Haig chose to proceed with an operation largely to salvage positive results from a disastrous year, relieve pressure on another front, and possibly in an effort to save his own job. After the unprecedented gains of the first day at Cambrai, the church bells rang in England for the first time since 1914. Two weeks later, after a successful German counter-attack the British Government was demanding a board of inquiry into Haig's conduct at Cambrai.

While the U.S. military places great emphasis on ensuring a commander's intent is accurately conveyed to subordinate commanders, events as recent as Vietnam and the 1991 Gulf War aptly demonstrate that a CINC's vision, even after extensive coordination and with state of the art communications, may not find root in his subordinate commanders. In The General's War, the authors make note of the fact that "to this day Schwarzkopf blames Franks for being too slow and letting too many Iraqis escape before the cease-fire."³

Haig as a Commander:

Since the end of the First World War, Sir Douglas Haig, perhaps more than any other commander in the conflict, has become a symbol of the senseless carnage of the Western Front. From his arrival in France in 1914 as a corps commander for the British Expeditionary Force until the Armistice of 1918, Haig has served as a symbol to many of all that was wrong with both the British military and armed forces in general. He was ultimately portrayed by many in Britain as the executioner of the "lost generation" or, at best, as an insensitive leader who was far too casual with the lives of the soldiers entrusted to him.

Today, Haig is remembered only for his campaign on the Western Front, which looks, from a contemporary perspective, as a monument to tragic ineptness. It was Haig after all, in his first major operation as the British Commander in Chief on the Western Front, who opted to continue the Somme offensive for three months after suffering 60,000 casualties on the first day of the operation. He followed this in early 1917 with a two-month battle at Arras where he accepted an average of some 4,000 casualties a day to follow up on a minimal gain.⁴

The next offensive was a similar story. Originally known as Third Ypres, it developed into a battle at Passchendaele during three horrific months of attrition warfare. What his detractors have forgotten, however, is that Haig's position was not nearly as simple as one would believe. At both the Somme and Arras, Haig was essentially forced to act, at locations not of his own choosing, based on the need to relieve pressure on the French Army which had been bled white by German pressure at Verdun and was on the verge of mutiny. Later, Ypres and Cambrai can be seen, in fact, as being part of Haig's belief that the French would no longer aggressively pursue the war. These and later operations were also an attempt to realize Haig's vision that, "his Army would be the weapon for the achievement of victory in 1918 and that its methods must be adapted to changed conditions."⁵

Haig's military career prior to his appointment as CINC in December 1915, despite the success inherent in his rise to flag rank, was characterized by a tendency towards staff work with limited experience commanding troops in the field. His initial overseas assignment was to India with the 7th Hussars where his industry brought him an appointment as adjutant. Following a tour at the British Staff College, Haig spent time in Egypt and the Sudan, again with limited experience leading troops. His subsequent assignments in Africa included both staff work and the equivalent of regimental command for a period during the Boer War. After another stint in India, Haig was given a corps command. Although well-versed in the theory of employing large units, in 1912 Haig's first Corps-level exercise provided a less than auspicious beginning when, "he was generally considered to have been defeated...but worse was his showing at the final

conference.”⁶ As a hint of what was to come at Cambrai, during the final conference Haig proved unable to articulate the rationale for his actions during the exercise.

Once the war began, Haig found himself in France as a corps commander, and later the Commanding General of the British First Army. As the war settled down into a stalemate in 1915, Haig became increasingly frustrated in his role as a subordinate commander. Equally, he began to think of himself as the logical choice to replace Sir John French as the British theatre CINC. As French’s fortunes waned, Haig increasingly used his influence with the Royal family, as well as his military connections, to lobby for the CINC position. The extent to which this process developed could be seen when Haig raised the topic directly with the King on 24 October 1915, criticizing the current CINC for “obstinacy,” “conceit” and “incapacity.”⁷ As Clark notes, “The King listened attentively. That afternoon, he confided to Haig that he had had an informal chat with General Haking who had told him much the same thing... When Haig got back to his headquarters... he must have felt that he was on the point of achieving a vital personal victory.”⁸

Among the more interesting aspects of Haig’s style of command, intricately linked to the above discussion, were his sense of destiny coupled with his deeply held religious conviction. As Dr. Gerard J. De Groot notes,

Haig did not doubt that he would return from the Great War ‘covered in glory’. More importantly, he was certain that God was constantly by his side and that he was the instrument of Divine Providence. This faith was central to Haig’s confidence in his ability to command... Haig developed a profound awareness of the spiritually purifying effects of hard work. When combined with fierce ambition and gargantuan self-assurance, this ‘work ethic’ made Haig into a formidable soldier...⁹

These beliefs were no doubt instrumental in crucial decisions made by Haig as a leader. They also provided him with a degree of optimism, for lack of a better term, which was not always readily apparent to his political leadership (particularly Prime Minister Lloyd George who grew increasingly dissatisfied with Haig during 1917), or the common soldiers in the trenches. As De Groot adds,

Haig has often been criticized for being overly optimistic. That he was so is beyond doubt, whether this was an impediment to effective command is a matter of judgement. But it is

important to distinguish between optimism and faith. Optimism is a tendency to assume a positive interpretation of received information... Faith, on the other hand, is an act of trust, an assumption—made without material evidence—that all is well.¹⁰

While it is certain that optimism in some form (and perhaps faith in a wider sense) is a crucial characteristic for an operational commander, in Haig's case these elements of his personality took on increased importance, particularly when considered in connection with his serious inability to articulate either his orders or, more importantly, his intentions for the conduct of operations. Ironically, it was George Duncan, Haig's Chaplain, who seems to have best captured Haig's difficulties in expressing himself,

His reserve, combined with his lack of ease in conversation, was, of course, a serious handicap in dealing with certain types of men, or in men in a mass. He had, for example, none of the dazzling volubility with which his army colleague, Sir Henry Wilson, readily gained the ear, and the confidence of, Mr. Lloyd George. So too he was without those popular gifts which have enabled some military leaders, especially those with a field command, to establish close personal relations with the troops. Yet there was something in Haig which undoubtedly inspired confidence. Those who worked in closest association with him were enthusiastic about him; among those who knew him only at a distance, and indeed throughout the army as a whole, there was a recognition that he was a man to be trusted to the full.¹¹

What can be said was that Haig was a complex individual who was a product of his system and who was bright, yet lacking in brilliance, and who was experienced without having spent long periods of time in command of troops. In the end, William Puleston argues that,

Haig was a strictly professional soldier in the highest sense of the term. When selected to become Commander-in-Chief, he had passed every test that can be applied to officers during a long career; he was familiar with modern staff methods, a life-long student of war, and had served long enough in India to understand the character of the British army which is formed on the frontiers of the empire... One of the main reasons that actuated the British Cabinet in selecting Haig was their belief that he was a solid conservative soldier who perhaps lacked brilliance but would not act hastily or involve the whole British Army in some desperate encounter. Haig was extremely taciturn and in conferences was so inarticulate that he did not always succeed in giving supporting oral reasons for his proposed actions.¹²

What remains in painting a portrait of Haig as an operation commander is to understand something of how Haig viewed the role of the Commander in Chief. In this, E.K.G. Sixsmith, as one of Haig's more balanced biographers, was particularly effective. In fact, as Sixsmith explains it was during Haig's tenure in Sudan and South Africa that the future British CINC developed two crucial beliefs that would both define his perspective and ultimately characterize his failure at

Cambrai. Specifically, while writing a report on the conduct of the fighting in Sudan, Haig noted that it was the overall commander's responsibility to delegate authority and "to ensure that their subordinates...learned their true function as (subordinate) commanders."¹³ Later, in South Africa, Haig added that "It appeared that the decision of fighting the enemy in a chosen position was one on which the Commander-in-Chief alone should give an opinion. A defeat or a victory must have important results on a campaign. It was for the Commander-in-Chief to decide whether either a political decision...or the military situation...demanded that a battle should be risked."¹⁴

Background: The Cambrai Operation

In the context of World War I, the British offensive at Cambrai was a moderately sized action involving just the British Third Army under Sir Julian Byng. The operation, which began on 20 November 1917, lasted roughly two weeks including both the British assault and the German counter attack. Casualties on both sides were approximately equal at something over 40,000. The Cambrai operation came, however, at a particularly important point in the war and had critical political, strategic and operational overtones in addition to the important new tactics first evidenced in the battle.

Cambrai followed closely on the heels of three months of continual combat at Third Ypres and Passchendaele, and at a time when both Haig and his government needed a victory to salvage something from their worst year of the war. Additionally, Allied forces were being pushed back in Italy following a significant victory by the Central Powers in October at Caporetto. This setback forced Haig to plan to release at least three infantry divisions for transfer to the Italian Front in mid-November 1917. Thus, German and Austro-Hungarian success in Italy, combined with the disintegration of the Russian war effort and the failure to achieve success on the Western Front placed a variety of pressures on Haig in his crucial command. Finally, the new technologies and tactics of the defensive (machine guns, poison gas, wireless communication, effective aerial observation and long range artillery) had driven the stalemate on

the Western Front to a state unmatched in warfare to that day and never again seen in such a form.

Given this situation, Cambrai was to serve as a turning point for a return to offensive operations which would be today termed "maneuver warfare." During both the British attack, and the German counterattack, each side revealed the methods by which they would restore the war of movement in 1918. For the British this included, for the first time, the use of massed armor, aircraft and artillery working together as combined arms according to a specific plan that attempted to pursue strategic goals on both the operational and tactical level. As implied above, Cambrai appears to represent a return to what today would be called operational art. The lessons of this operation would be clearly evidenced in 1918 by the British at Amiens and at St. Michiel by the Americans. Together these operations would later form the basis on which the Germans would develop the concept of *blitzkrieg*.

The British assembled a significant force for the Cambrai operation which included three British Corps as well as five French divisions in reserve which Haig never employed. V Corps was the only British force available to exploit a breakthrough. Because they had not been employed extensively, the cavalry divisions included in the plan as maneuver forces had minimal experience, poor leadership and were not in position until well after the attack began. Overall, the British order of battle and tactical disposition was as follows,

The assault was entrusted to III and IV Army Corps. The attack frontage was some six miles, from the Canal du Nord south-eastwards as far as the Bonavis Ridge, and Third Army as a whole was raised to nineteen infantry divisions, fourteen of which had been through the fire of Passchendaele... These included the army reserve, V Corps, comprising three divisions, but this was no real strategic reserve for the plan had allotted V Corps an integral part in the battle... Nearly four hundred fighting tanks were to be distributed between the two assaulting infantry corps; the entire strength of the Tank Corps.¹⁵

The operation described above was not the original intention of the planners of the Cambrai operation. The genesis of the attack comes from a plan conceived by Tank Corps Commander Brigadier General Hugh Elles and his Chief Staff Officer Lieutenant Colonel J.F.C. Fuller, and was originally intended to be simply a large-scale tank raid of less than a day's

duration. In August 1917, Elles began working with Third Army Commander General Byng to plan and conduct such a raid in the drier, quieter sector of the British front that Byng commanded. As observed by General Marshall-Cornwall, "Byng not only welcomed this idea, but improved on it. One of his artillery commanders had developed a new system of predicted shooting without previous registration... By this means complete surprise could be effected and the infantry could advance over unbroken ground."¹⁶

Ultimately, the plan for Cambrai was simple, the tanks would capitalize on the surprise afforded by the new type of artillery bombardment (previous offensives had been preceded by days of preparatory bombardment), to advance over undisturbed ground followed closely by infantry. Once a breakthrough was achieved, several divisions of cavalry would move forward and "exploit" the gap (see also Appendix A). Unfortunately, because Haig was well aware of the economy of force imposed on the operation, and perhaps because the CINC alone knew that he did not intend to use the French forces held in reserve, the CINC chose to emphasize narrow geographical objectives. Specifically, Haig decided to focus on a small ridge known as Bourslon Wood which overlooked German positions to the north. In doing so, he had apparently concluded that Bourslon Wood was not simply a decisive point, but a viable objective for the operation in its own right. What Haig did not seem to believe, and which therefore did not appear in his orders, was that a breakthrough offered a chance to turn the German flank and destroy a large portion of their forces in Flanders,

Haig had ultimately decided on an advance with limited objectives in the vicinity of Cambrai, but not necessarily focused on the town itself. He revised Byng's plan to concentrate on the Bourslon Ridge, which, if captured, would provide British forces with excellent observation of the 'battle' and 'rearward' zones. Unwilling to discount completely the possibility of a breakthrough, Haig nevertheless retained the option to terminate the operation at the end of forty-eight hours unless clear progress was evident. By October 1917, Fuller had revised his original 'tank raids' proposal to incorporate Byng's and Haig's guidance.¹⁷

General Byng, although concerned that Third Ypres had ended and the Germans would be able to focus on his attack at Cambrai, still saw the possibility of exploiting the breakout, and discussed with Haig at length the proper objectives of the operation.¹⁸ While Byng planned a

penetration followed by exploitation, which would include the capture of Bourslon and Cambrai while turning north to trap additional German forces, Haig insisted that Bourslon Wood (which could have been bypassed) be captured *before* pushing through the gap to Cambrai and the enemy's rear areas.¹⁹

Haig did not, however, limit the plan to the seizure of Bourslon, and allowed Byng to proceed with far wider ranging plans. Instead, as a means of exercising control, the CINC indicated that he would decide whether to continue the offensive within 48 hours following H-hour. In the end, Haig elected to continue attacking beyond the first two days, reinforcing the heavy fighting as the engagement at Bourslon Wood ground to a stalemate. After exhausting available reserves, elements of the Third Army captured most of Bourslon Wood at great loss--only to have to abandon their new positions in the face of a German counter-attack. By remaining committed to the engagement at Bourslon, instead of maneuvering around the stronghold as Byng's plan allowed, the momentum of the offensive dissipated and the Germans were able to hold long enough to mount a counter-offensive which successfully cut off the newly created salient and forced a return to roughly the same positions as had existed prior to the battle (See also Appendix B).

Thus, an operation which began with a four and a half mile penetration of the German lines on the first day, and which had completely demoralized the German defenses at a minimal cost, was extended into yet another battle of attrition that the British could ill-afford. Immediately following the operation, and having exhausted the Prime Minister's patience, Haig was called upon to explain the reversal of fortune at Cambrai before a board of inquiry. The upshot of this board was that Haig would remain the British CINC for the remainder of the war (although he was forced to replace his Chief of Intelligence), but he would ultimately be placed under the overall command of General Foch of the French Army.

Haig's Failure to Define and Communicate His Intentions:

In simplest terms, Cambrai failed because Haig was unable to clarify his goals. To compound matters, once engaged, Haig allowed himself to become involved in the operation at the tactical level, deciding on decisive points and moving tactical level units. All of this must, of course, be considered in the context of Haig's stated purpose that the Cambrai operation was actually designed to accomplish strategic goals. Namely, to relieve pressure on the Italian Front, provide a victory of some sort prior to the end of the year to sustain public and governmental support for his conduct of the campaign on the Western front and, finally, to cause attrition among German forces in theater. Ultimately, as Robert Woolcombe notes,

The object of the offensive was diffuse: whether to take pressure off the Italian front, or to forestall German divisions from the East, or as Byng had first thought of it, as a diversion dependent upon the continuation of Third Ypres; or even to prevent the Germans from attacking the French whose paradoxical offer of help was turned down. All seemed to have been conceived out of underlying contradictions²⁰.

Regardless, given the benefit of the doubt, it can be argued that Haig was simply attempting to achieve strategic goals through the operational employment of his forces—a matter that was definitely within his prerogative as the theater CINC. That said, even the official history of the Royal Air Force noted, "It will be observed that the Commander-in-Chief's outline of his expectations is in conflict with his declaration that the attack was a limited one which aimed only at local success. The possibilities were, in fact, inherent in the original plans, but the troops were not available, nor were the preparations adequate, for an operation on such a scale."²¹

For his part, Haig was at least partially aware of the contradictions in his own intentions for the campaign, and it was clear that he decided to accept a considerable degree of risk in moving forward with the Cambrai operation. As the CINC himself indicated,

While considering these different factors, preparations were quietly carried on, so that all might be ready for the attack if I found it possible to carry it out. The success of the enemy's offensive in Italy subsequently added great force to the arguments in favor of undertaking the operations, although the means at my disposal for the purpose were further reduced as a consequence of the Italian situation. Eventually I decided that, despite the various limiting factors, I could muster enough force *to make a first success sufficiently sure to justify undertaking the attack*, (italics added) but the degree to which this success could be followed up must depend on the circumstances.²²

It has become clear, however, that Haig never intended the attack to be the penetration and maneuver operation for which Byng was planning. Haig spoke privately to his chaplain on the eve of the battle, "and he emphasized that any success would be strictly limited, he did not have the troops to exploit it."²³

Thus, Haig had created a situation in which he had not established a consistent vision that could be communicated to his subordinate commanders. This problem was then compounded by Haig's increasing involvement in the operation at a tactical level,

Though urging Byng to take personal charge, Sir Douglas himself had inevitably become the battle controller the moment he departed from his original plan to call a halt in two days if there was no breakthrough. The decision to go on meant defining different objectives, devising a new policy. Only he, not Byng, could do that. But Haig had no contingency plans, merely hopes. Not renowned as an original thinker, he saw the completion of the capture of Bourlon as the only way ahead. On the Somme, at Arras and at Ypres he had given orders to at least two army commanders who had in turn directed several corps commanders. At Cambrai the Field Marshal reached a point at which he was concentrating his efforts on the operations of a single corps.²⁴

Some, such as Dennis Winter, take this argument as step farther and note that "Haig had taken command in person throughout."²⁵ This, of course, caused great consternation on the part of General Byng who held tactical control of the units with which Haig allowed himself to become involved,

Against his better judgement, Byng was thus committed to fighting a battle, in Foch's phrase, 'through the neck of a bottle'. His sole comfort was Haig's assurance that if nothing substantial had been achieved within the first forty-eight hours, the battle would be closed down. As a close associate of Haig, Byng must have known Haig's reluctance to let go of a battle and would probably have regarded this assurance with pessimism later events were to justify.²⁶

In the end, it can be safely stated that Haig's authority to commit to the Cambrai operation is unquestioned. Unfortunately, there is no evidence that he ever made clear to Byng that he wanted only a "*success sufficiently sure to justify undertaking the attack.*" In other words, what Haig really wanted was not a breakthrough and a rout of German forces, which he did not believe he could achieve, but rather some form of incremental dividend which might provide some strategic benefit, but which was more closely tied to ending the year on a positive note. As William Moore observes, perhaps too harshly,

Haig had seen the Battle of Beaumont Hamel as a fitting end to the fighting in 1916. He could not expect Gough to pull a rabbit out of the hat in the autumn of 1917—he seemed to have lost his touch—but Byng! There would be all sorts of oohs and aahs when the curtain went up (at Cambrai) and the tanks and aeroplanes roared into the extravaganza's opening number.²⁷

In Haig's Defense

Upon close examination, it is clear that Haig's problems at Cambrai were not entirely of his own making. His staff did not serve him at all well, as became clear in the investigation that followed the operation and led to the dismissal of Haig's Chief of Intelligence, Brigadier General John Charteris. In fact, according to one of Haig's biographers,

Haig's offensive at Cambrai was a bold gamble, based on false calculation of German strength and morale. During the first 19 days of November, prior to the attack, the Cambrai sector had been reinforced by four additional divisions, three of which had been identified by his intelligence staff, although Charteris deliberately withheld the information from his C-in-C.²⁸

This point, however, does not in any way diminish the overall fact that Haig's forces were employed without clear knowledge of what they were to accomplish. While it is impossible to be certain how Haig would have reacted to learning that the German defenses were stronger than he anticipated, based on his character it appears likely that he would have proceeded with the operation anyway. This is true because of the disconnect between his operational intent and the operational plan he authorized. Simply put, it appears Haig always intended the operation to be a limited operation, with a narrow geographic goal. The tragedy remains that he allowed his subordinate commanders to plan and anticipate exploitation and maneuver.

A better argument relates to a point that has similar relevance to today's CINC. Haig's failure was not simply based on misunderstood intentions, but on relatively poor subordinate leadership at the division level and below, and more importantly, the extremely difficulty of employing new technology, weapons and tactics in battle when neither the troops, nor their leadership, fully understood or trusted the new system. In fact, tanks were still new and had achieved poor results until Cambrai, while the entire artillery and air support schemes were revolutionary. Modern day analogs might include incorporating precision engagement, stealth technology, information warfare and perhaps directed energy weapons into a current or future

operational plan. Thus Haig deserves full marks for being willing to accept and use new ideas, while praise should be tempered for failing to understand that more training would have given a good plan a genuine chance for success.

Lessons Learned:

While there were many lessons to Cambrai, several stand out as primary examples for today. In noting these points, it is crucial to return to the premise that Cambrai was not simply a battle in a largely forgotten war, but rather a defining moment as warfare made a leap from the 19th to the 20th Century. Today's military and civilian leaders are facing precisely the same sort of changes today as evidenced in the Quadrennial Defense Review and Joint Vision 2010. Similarly, just like Haig, a future CINC may be forced to test new concepts and technology in battle without extensive prior training or experience. Further, today's theater commanders are faced with extremely high visibility, a political structure which cannot afford costly mistakes, and innumerable types of military operations other than war, in which poor leadership from a CINC can lead to serious military and policy consequences.

In this context, the primary lesson of Cambrai is that *a CINC's first, and overarching responsibility is to ensure at almost any cost that his subordinate commanders understand precisely the spirit and letter of the commander's intent for any operation.* At Cambrai what Haig wanted and expected was a minor victory predicated on the capture of Boursies, what Byng was planning for was a breakout and maneuver. This miscommunication cost the British over 40,000 casualties.

The second lesson is that *an operational commander must allow his subordinate commanders to translate operational goals into tactical terms once the CINC has defined his intent.* As quoted above, "[t]hrough urging Byng to take personal charge, Sir Douglas himself had inevitably become the battle controller the moment he departed from his original plan to call a halt in two days if there was no breakthrough." Should anyone believe this is not a problem to this day, it is only necessary to examine the difficulties General Schwartzkopf perceived between

himself and General Franks of the U.S. Army's VII Corps and General Boomer of the Marines during the Gulf War. By way of a corollary, Haig also made the one mistake no commander can afford. Not only did he interfere at the tactical level, but he ultimately did so in order to reinforce failure at Bourslon rather than to exploit success in other sectors.

The third lesson that Cambrai would seem to offer for the operational commander of today would be *to examine carefully all personal motives and biases in making operational decisions*. This point is extremely subjective, but no less important. Although Haig tried to justify his decision to proceed with the Cambrai operation on strategic grounds, his motive undoubtedly had both a political, and more importantly a personal angle—he had been unsuccessful in breaking the stalemate in two costly years of fighting on the Western Front, and he feared that the Prime Minister would use his failure to justify replacing him. Being of good character, Haig did not fear being replaced out of vanity, but rather because he sincerely believed he was the best man for the job and it was his destiny to succeed. Today's CINC can be called upon to do a variety of tasks, and he must be able to translate his good character into leadership that best supports the interests of the country irrespective of personal costs.

Conclusions:

Several generations of historians have taken Haig to task for his conduct in the First World War, and it would seem that his role in such a distant conflict would have little meaning for today. Yet, rather than emphasizing the differences between 1917 and today, it is crucial to recognize the similarities between situation which Haig faced and those which confront a CINC today. In both cases, new technology has been developed and integrated into a force structure designed for a different era. Similarly, just as was the case in Haig's day, a modern CINC faces a variety of constant political and strategic pressures which impact directly on the conduct of military activities at the operational level. What can be deduced from the similarities of the respective situations, then, is that elements of leadership (in this case operational, but similar arguments can be made on the strategic or tactical levels) remain constant. Nowhere is this more

true than in the area of defining and communicating a commander's intent. In this context, even easily avoided differences can have tragic consequences, as was the case at Cambrai. As Warfighting, the current U.S. Marine Corps doctrine manual notes, "The first requirement is to establish our intent; what we want to accomplish and how. Without a clearly defined intent, the necessary unity of effort is inconceivable."²⁹

Lastly, just as in Haig's time, a senior commander must make every effort to understand the motives that will shape his intentions. A CINC must reach the conclusion that a course of action will represent the best possible translation of a strategic goal into an operational reality, and not a lesser goal of improving a personal situation or providing a short term tactical solution. Equally, once a decision is made, and intent defined, the commander must, in today's terms allow execution to be "decentralized" and to permit subordinate commanders to act as they see fit. If there is a difference between the early 1900s and the late 1990s, it is that the time pressures of warfare are increasingly critical, and to be successful an operational commander must have both a clearly defined vision and the proper faith in those entrusted with its execution.

The final word on Haig as a leader at Cambrai is accorded to John Terraine who provided a useful summary of Haig's performance at Cambrai,

The set-back at Cambrai represents the lowest ebb of Haig's career. It created difficulties for him which greatly complicated those which inevitably arrived with the return of Germany's divisions from the East and their offensive the following March. It weakened his prestige and position at a time when he needed every support he could get. It laid him open to criticism and attacks more severe than any he had yet experienced. Not all of these were unjustified; some of them were.... Haig's intention was to round off the year with a heavy blow to the enemy, and this he certainly achieved. But the small, vital degree of failure, *also on that day*, points to an unclarity of intention, and imprecision of execution, for which he must bear a part of the blame—though not the full blame which he so readily shouldered when the exasperated Government called for an enquiry... Every credit is due to General Byng and his staff for the remarkable degree of surprise which they achieved on November 20th; but what is the good of effecting a huge surprise, unless the purpose of it is clearly understood?

NOTES:

¹ Woollcombe, Robert, The First Tank Battle: Cambrai 1917 (London: Arthur Barker Limited, 1967) 204.

² U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff. Joint Vision 2010—America's Military Preparing for Tomorrow 15.

³ Gordon, Michael R and Trainor, Bernard E. The General's War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995) 429.

⁴ Paschall, Rod, The Defeat of Imperial Germany (New York, Da Capo Press, 1994) 119.

⁵ Sixsmith, E.K.G., Douglas Haig (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976) 170.

⁶ Sixsmith 65.

⁷ Clark, Alan, The Donkeys (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1962) 179.

⁸ Clarke 179.

⁹ De Groot, Dr. Gerard, "Haig's Secret Weapon," Army Quarterly and Defense Journal January 1993: 60.

¹⁰ De Groot 65.

¹¹ Duncan, G.S., Douglas Haig as I Knew Him (London: George Allen and Unwin LTD, 1966) 24-25.

¹² Puleston, William Dilworth, High Command in the World War (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934) 181.

¹³ Sixsmith 20.

¹⁴ Sixsmith 34.

¹⁵ Woollcombe 31.

¹⁶ Marshall-Cornwall, General Sir James, Haig as Military Commander (New York: Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., 1973) 248.

¹⁷ Cavaleri, David, "The British Tank Detachment at Cambrai: Lessons Learned and Lost Opportunities," Armor, November-December 1996: 27

¹⁸ Winter 123.

¹⁹ Moore, William. A Wood Called Bourlon. (London: Leo Cooper, 1988) 79.

²⁰ Woollcombe 205.

²¹ Jones, H.A., The War in the Air. Vol. IV, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934) 229.

²² Boraston J.H., Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons LTD., 1919) 152.

²³ Duncan 67.

²⁴ Moore 128.

²⁵ Winter, Denis, Haig's Command (London: The Penguin Group, 1991) 114.

²⁷ Moore 42.

²⁸ Marshall-Cornwall 254.

²⁹ U.S. Department of the Navy, Washington, D.C.: FMFM-1, Warfighting. (Washington, D.C., 6 March 1989) 66.

³⁰ Terraine, John, The Ordeal of Victory (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1963) 379.

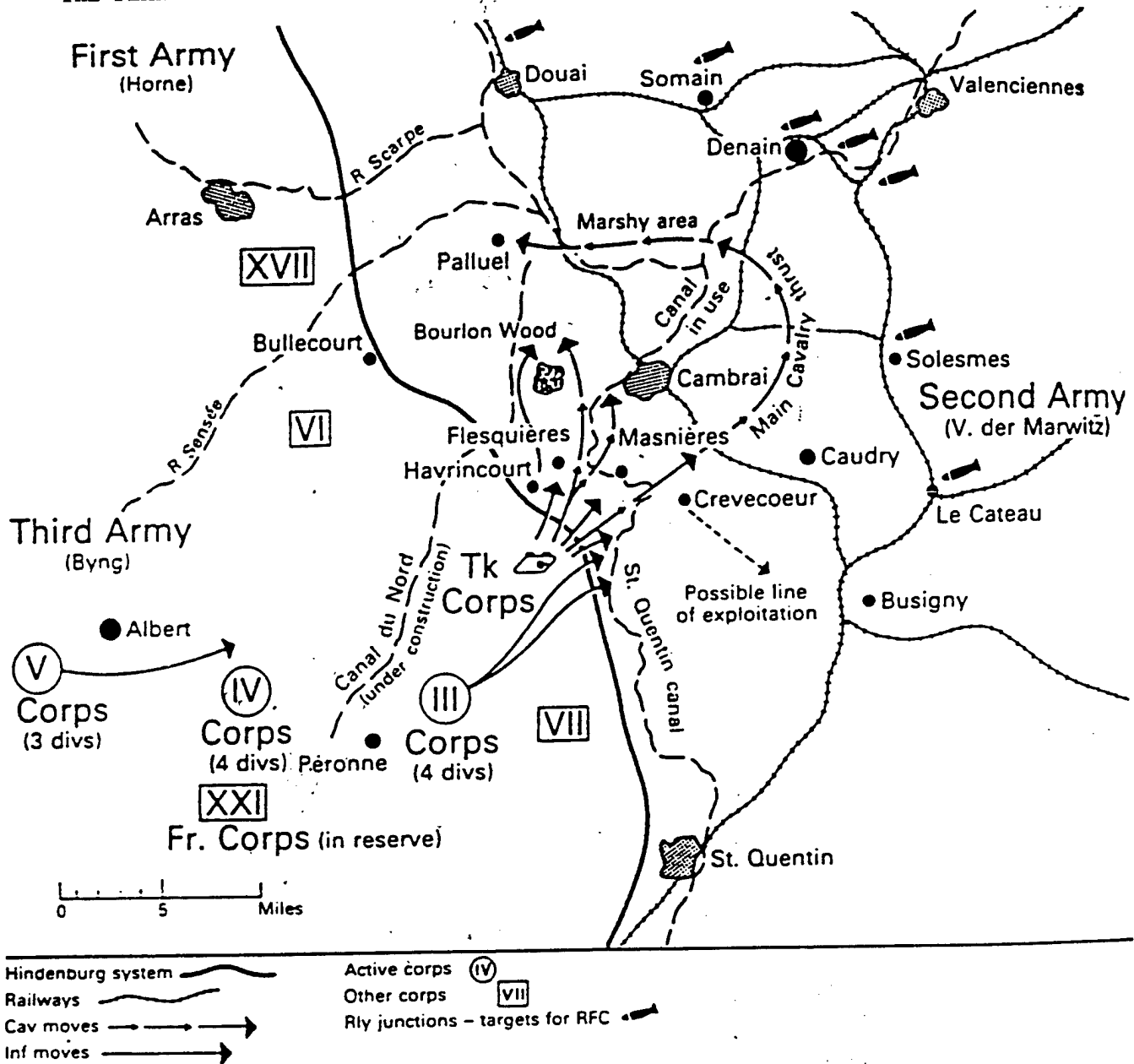
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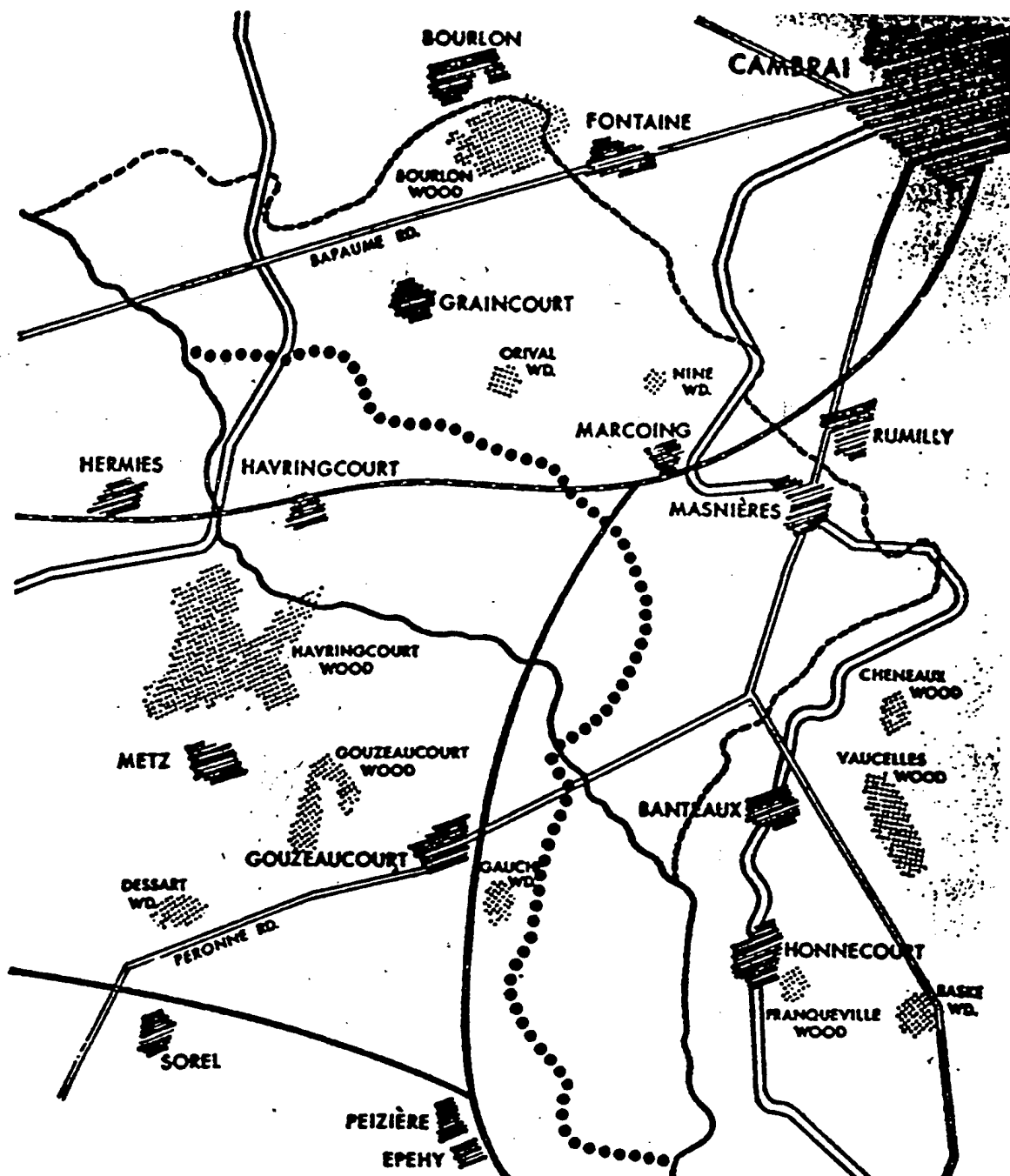
APPENDIX A:

THE PLAN




Source:

Moore, William. A Wood Called Bourlon.
(London: Leo Cooper, 1988) 59.



The End of The Battle, December 7.

original British front 
 extent of advance
 final position

Source:

Cooper, Bryan. The Battle of Cambrai
(New York: Stein and Day, 1967) 214.